# Decomposing the Humanities

Steven Connor


New Literary History, Volume 47, Numbers 2 & 3, Spring & Summer 2016, pp. 275-288 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
*DOI:* *https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2016.0014*

# Decomposing the Humanities

Steven Connor

One of the things that anyone involved in the murky business of humanities scholarship comes to know, without knowing how, or perhaps without even knowing that they know it, is the difference between criticism and critique. It was necessary to internalize this understanding because it might be said that the decisive and defining shift that took place with the reorganization of the humanities from the 1980s onward around the various forms of theory was the shift from criticism to critique. Terry Eagleton once gently mocked a certain kind of literary criticism as the practice of inscribing "could do better" in the margins of literary texts, but that mode of criticism already seemed mistily antiquarian when I entered my own life of intellectual crime under Terry's witty tutelage at Wadham College in 1973. The thing known as criticism, or at least a certain ideal conception of it, was governed by the Arnoldian injunction to try to see the object as in itself it really is. Criticism required one to inhabit the text, to learn to see things in its own terms. There was a time, let us remind ourselves with amazement, when "criticism" might also have been known as "critical appreciation." The alumni who studied English in Cambridge in the 1950s and 1960s recognize clearly enough in the pained letters they occasionally write to me that literary appreciation, now thought of as credulous and soft-headed weakness, has given way to analysis in the service of deprecation.

Critique, by contrast, was characterized by a kind of deliberated recoil from the voluptuous temptations represented by texts, the cultivation of an alert, no-flies-on-me vigilance about the acts of reading and interpretation. Critique was underpinned by theory in a way that criticism never could be, because critique always both required and, more importantly in terms of thymotic satisfactions, reliably delivered the sense that the text had been outwitted. Critique allowed one to come at one's object of analysis from some higher ground, or rather perhaps from some cunning subterranean passage, which enabled one to tunnel behind or underneath its presumptions, articulate its silences, to see it, in short, not as in itself it really was, but as it was unable to see itself.

The growth of critique is not entirely due to the desire for dominion or for aristocratic immunity from guilt—or at least from gullibility. It is

*New Literary History,* 2016, 47: 275–288

surely also a response to the sense that the humanities need to account for themselves, whether to justify their continued funding or secure the self-esteem of their exponents. A humanities dedicated to the work of critique can seem, or at least feel itself to be, an altogether more earnest and self-denyingly austere affair than a humanities dedicated to footling frolics of mere appreciation. One of the signs of this purposiveness was and is the absence of a noun form for the one who practices critique. Where it was clear that somebody engaged in the act of criticism could be called a "critic," it was not at all clear how one should refer to the person engaged in the work of critique. A critiquer? Critiquist? "Critical theorist" is the closest we have come. This invisibility or unsayability is odd, given that critique tended to be regarded as a much more systematic affair of disciplinary self-formation, requiring not just high levels of training but also unresting, out-of-hours zeal. I have no ready explanation to offer for this odd unnameability, unless it is that critique prefers to keep its deep psychic satisfactions unacknowledged.

The growth of an aggressive hermeneutics of suspicion made for a danger, that the flame of denunciation would burn through the entire canon of cultural objects. But this was defended against by the structurally necessary discovery that texts, or the best ones, the ones that would survive torching by critique, were the ones that could be seen to be themselves engaged in the very same work of critique, of themselves or some other object. So the show-trials of the critical humanities turned into mass reprievals of those texts which actively cooperated with the work of their interrogators and coughed up the names and addresses of their co-conspirators.

Bruno Latour's work has been for some considerable time propelled by a dissatisfaction with this work of critique. If there is one principle associated with the kind of work that Latour wants to encourage, though his addressees tend to be those in the social sciences rather than the humanities, it is the abandonment of critique, in favor of more affirmative postures and actions. Latour can be generous in his appreciation of his intellectual heroes—Gabriel Tarde, William James, and A. N. Whitehead are the names that recur in his recent work—but there is none as heroic, none as appreciated, and none whose work anticipates and enables as much of Latour's own, as Michel Serres. Latour's appreciation of Serres depends upon the fact that he sees in him a philosopher who abjures critique. "A 'critique' philosopher sees his task as that of establishing a distance between beliefs on the one hand and knowledge on the other, or between ideologies and science, or between democracy and terror—just to take three avatars of the 'Critique.' To be taken in, that is the main worry of a critique philosopher. . . . The Critique work is that

of a reduction of the world into two packs, a little one that is sure and certain, the immense rest which is simply believed and in dire need of being criticized, founded, re-educated, straightened up."[1]

Latour praises Serres for not joining in this kind of bisecting, adversarial game. Critique is an agonistic, even a martial affair, and holding back from critique is part of Serres's oneiric sense of the vocation of philosophy, which he understands less as the love of knowledge than the knowledge of love. In the only conversation I have ever had with him, knowing of his interest in sport, I attempted some lamely matey banter about international rugby, with a teasing remark about the superior performance (at the time) of the English rugby team compared with the French. He replied with a shrug, accompanied by a "what-can-you-do?" half-smile, that gently but definitively declined to play the vulgarly adversarial game to which I was trying to recruit him. I had been reproved and felt I had something to expiate, a pettiness. For Serres, intellectual life cannot be conducted in the mode of attack and defence. There is in fact a great deal more ferocity in Serres than one might expect, but what he is most ferociously is an intellectual noncombatant. One might go even further and say that Serres's work gently and for the most part unaggressively, like the wise parent distracting the toddler from its imperious tantrum, encourages its reader to become less interested in the self-indulgent agonies associated with epistemology—what can we know for sure? How can we avoid being made fools of?

Latour returns repeatedly to Serres's work for an example of how to do without the voluptuously austere pleasures of critique. In a later, oft-cited essay, Latour writes mockingly of the way in which the austere and aristocratic sense of distinction offered by the exercise of critique has become universally available. "Isn't this fabulous? Isn't it really worth going to graduate school to study critique? 'Enter here, you poor folks. After arduous years of reading turgid prose, you will be always right, you will never be taken in any more; no one, no matter how powerful, will be able to accuse you of naiveté, that supreme sin, any longer?'"[2] And yet passages like this are an unmistakeable indication that Latour is as much driven by the libido of critique as anyone else. Time and again his work lays out the egregious errors of our own condition or our understanding of it that must be rinsed away by clear-eyed reflection. Latour's signature text in this respect is *We Have Never Been Modern*, which seems to take vast and mischievous pleasure in dismantling the core assumption of social theory, economic thought, and anthropological inquiry that, whatever else we may be, we can be sure at least that we are modern, in the sense that we have somehow been propelled into a condition in which we must stand outside and opposed to merely natu-

ral existence. To be sure, Latour is more inclined to encourage a sort of retoxification—the acknowledgement of complex, natural/cultural entanglements and confederations—than the detoxification of purifying differentiations of culture and nature. But the impulse to expunge and escape from erroneous thinking is as strong in him as in anyone, not least in the stylish comedy of his polemic, comedy never being far away from cruelty.

One of the difficulties with the project of showing repeatedly and ever more definitively that we have never been modern is that one must start to wonder who precisely the people are who are supposed to inhabit this noncategory (or, rather, perhaps, not to inhabit it). The hyphenated not-modern people, those who wrongly assume they are modern, come closer and closer to the unhyphenated folk who are just not modern, or have never been thought to be so in the first place. In *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, Latour surprisingly adopts the term "Blacks" to refer to such unmodern people.[3] And yet, this failure to make it as a hypothecated modern may be the very thing that marks you most definitively as a modern (or White).

Latour has characterized the project announced in *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* as an attempt to move away from the negative mode of his own earlier work, as sternly intimated in the title of his *We Have Never Been Modern*, in order to "at last be able to give a positive, rather than merely a negative, version of those who 'have never been modern.'"[4] One wonders if there is not a memory in this characterization of his difficulty in finding a term to describe Serres's philosophy: "I am struggling for a word that would best describe Michel Serres' philosophy. 'Positive' would come to mind if Comte had not given this word a dubious posterity."[5] *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* sets out to ask, if we have never been modern, what is is that we have been? It is for this reason that the book is subtitled *An Anthropology of the Moderns*. The Moderns must be taken to be those who take themselves (erroneously) to be modern. It is perhaps a little like the distinction between white noise and pink noise. Both of them are, and sound like, kinds of noise: but where white noise is a purely random distribution of frequencies, pink noise is a distribution of frequencies in which the power-frequency relationship aligns with human hearing. Pink noise is a homelier, fleshier, less noisy sort of noise. The way of being not-modern that Moderns, indeed *"the* Moderns," exhibit, sounds reassuringly modern.

One might say that, for Latour, what are ever more definitively called, not just modern persons, but "The Moderns," are persons for whom being modern is somehow an issue, in something of the same way as an existential philosopher defines the human as that form of being for

whom being is in question. So the Moderns are not not-modern in any common-or-garden way of being not modern, the way characteristic of people (and nonpeople) to whom it has never occurred to think of themselves as modern. Rather, they are not-modern in a fractiously reflexive way that involves them assuming that they are in fact modern, when they are not. So, for Latour, only moderns whose modernity is qualified in this way in fact qualify as any kind of Modern at all. It is a kind of set-theoretical hokey-cokey, in which, by setting foot in the category of the modern, you step outside it, only to find yourself at that very moment back inside it. This is all made even more exquisite by the fact that what it means to take yourself to be modern is precisely a set of negations in the first place, since to be modern is to be in the condition evoked in Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium": "Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing." If to be modern is to be not-natural, to count as one of Latour's Moderns one must be not not-natural.

For Latour, the most important feature of a move beyond critique, or, if one wanted to avoid a preposition with which critique itself is so besotted, away from critique, in some other direction, is that it thereby becomes more able to accommodate and transact with objects. Critique, by contrast, carves objects away and carves the wielders of critique away from objects. Whatever might replace critique, by contrast, conveys us "not *away* but *toward* the gathering, the Thing."[6] Subtraction and abstraction thereby give way to accumulation and attraction: "Can we devise another powerful descriptive tool that deals this time with matters of concern and whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care, as Donna Haraway would put it? Is it really possible to transform the critical urge in the ethos of someone who *adds* reality to matters of fact and not *subtract* reality?"[7] Objects are etymologically what are thrown up against subjects, resisting or at least deflecting their equanimity. Relishing the opportunity it gives him to rebut the accusation that his work has tended to dissolve objects and the facts that represent them into social constructions, Latour argues that the remission or renunciation of critique is in fact in the interest of a renewed attention to objects, and so seems to call for the removal of the queasy quotation marks that seem to shimmer around words like "fact," "object," and "world." He has asked for a social science that might be described, not as worldly, where that word might imply a weary, jaded cynicism, but "earthly," meaning willing to concern itself with the nature of our embodied life on this planet: "While we might have had social sciences for modernizing and emancipating *humans*, we have not the faintest idea of what sort of social science is needed for *Earthlings* buried in the task of explicitating their newly discovered attachments."[8]

We may usefully wonder why object-orientation might be taken to be an invigoration for the humanities as for the social sciences with which Latour mostly concerns himself. One pressing reason would indeed be that the relation to objects precisely supplies the distinction that keeps the idea of "the humanities" in place and in one piece. From the outside, it appears that those in the humanities have objects of study in much the same way as other fields. Historians study the past, literary critics study things called literary texts (it doesn't matter that for some time we have had no idea what these are, because we can study the issue of our not-knowing), musicologists study music, and so, apparently, on. This looks isomorphic with the ways in which geographers study lakes and traffic systems, linguists study the workings of language, astronomers study celestial objects, biologists study living organisms (whatever that is meant to mean), and physicists study the nature of the matter whose various ways of being arranged go to make up the objects of all the other subjects.

In fact, though, the humanities are not so much absorbed in their apparent objects as absorbed in the nature of their absorption in them. Indeed, increasingly, the object of the humanities has been the condition and possibilities of the humanities themselves. My home subject, English literature, has been converted into a factory for the detection and denunciation of various kinds of social sin, and the affirmation of various kinds of social good. Students increasingly arrive in universities already knowing that the most important thing about literature is how far it conduces to the work of human emancipation from various kinds of unquestionable wrong. This means that the study of literature becomes self-explicating and self-promoting. We study literature, not because of an interest in what kind of thing literary texts might be or do, not so much for what literature may show or tell us about our condition, and certainly not for the sake of pleasure, but in order to demonstrate the value of developing the powers that studying literature is thought to give. The little objects represented by the individual texts that come under scrutiny are all really surrogates for the Big Object that is literature itself, or rather, literary texts as instructed and inflected by literary-critical analysis. Every reading is really an allegory of this kind of reading: it is an arena for the exhibition and performance of what literature, subject to the right kind of literary-critical attention, can do. This seems to apply across the humanities. Every now and again critical theory in the humanities is given a shot in the arm by the discovery of another kind of wrong (preferably an irremediable one) to denounce, such as, in recent times, the depredation of the earth. But the real question at issue in the humanities is always "what are the powers and

responsibilities of the humanities?" Almost always, it seems, the answer to that question is that the humanities are sovereign but neglected or marginalized, the unacknowledged legislators. The humanities are anti-elitist, but are founded upon a kind of democracy of *ressentiment* that allows everybody the fantasy of aristocratic distinction that comes from the exercise of critique.

The humanities have succeeded very well in defining themselves as a form of attention that is itself the answer to every problem that may be encountered. Vastly overvaluing their name, the humanities see themselves immodestly and incredibly as the custodians of the value of the human itself, which, so the theory goes, has always and everywhere to be rescued and redeemed from the alleged inhumanity of every object of critique, from capitalism to climate change. Throbbing behind this is a raw kind of vitalism: in defending the value of the human against other more technical or mechanical kinds of proceeding, the humanities identify themselves as the high priests of life making a stand against death.

Maybe I am really describing here, not the humanities in general, but English in particular. It is certainly the case that English has often acted on the assumption that it is at once the supreme form and the most representative form of the humanities as such. If I am being parochial here, my defense is that this is another defining feature of the humanities, namely the willingness of particular subjects to depend on this kind of synecdoche. In my experience, scientists, who may consent to be drawn politely and intelligently into discussion of the nature of scientific inquiry over a pint or a paella, do not spend their time wondering how or whether what they are doing does or does not constitute science, or actively embodies the spirit, value, or destiny of Science as such. But the only way to work in the humanities is to be continuously attuned to the question of what the humanities do and are. Everything done in the humanities bears on "the humanities." The circuit-diagram of the sciences, we might say, presents a complex and distributed picture. In the humanities, by contrast, every circuit seems to come straight off the fusebox, with the result that every overload or crossed wire seems to jeopardize the whole system. I think the disciplines known as "the humanities" could usefully learn to give up this obsessive self-reference, along with the pressure to autotrophic allegory, according to which every enterprise is justified as a proof or affirmation of what "art," "literature," "emotion," or any of the surrogates for the humanities themselves, can do.

Latour aims to make it possible for the humanities and social sciences to take more responsible account of earthly objects—of rivers and birds, of climate change, environmental damage, and species destruction. The most important thing here is to unlearn what it is to be modern, or

rather to recognize that we can never have been the kind of moderns that we had taken ourselves to be, that is, creatures exiled in an empire of discourse and culture that means we must remain at a fascinating, but tragic distance from the natural existence that is no longer possible for us. Instead, Latour would have us learn to recognize that "Cultures—different or universal—do not exist, any more than Nature does. There are only natures-cultures."[9] Ultimately, the project of showing that modern humans can never have been nonnatural is intended to ensure that we rapidly understand that what we do has consequences for nature, and therefore for us. We may thus be freed from the illusion of our freedom from nature and recognize, in Serres's frequently repeated formula, that "we depend on what depends on us."

The project of opening up awareness of ecological issues runs in parallel with a rather different sense in which modernization might give way to ecology. This concerns not the object of the humanities and social sciences, but rather their own form, or mode of organization. In *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, Latour proposes a work of redescription that may allow us "to give more space to *other values* that are very commonly encountered but that did not necessarily find a very comfortable slot for themselves within the framework offered by modernity: for example, politics, or religion, or law, values that the defense of Science in all its majesty had trampled along its way but which can now be deployed more readily. If it is a question of ecologizing and no longer of modernizing, it may become possible to bring a larger number of values into cohabitation within a somewhat richer ecosystem."[10] If we can all agree that such a proposal has a soothing sound, we should allow ourselves to wonder why. Perhaps it is because it seems so Hippocratic, adhering to the physician's principle of *primum non nocere*, "first do no harm." Ecologizing means including, comprehending, accepting, tolerating rather than deciding. We might well say that deciding in the sense of cutting off (*de+caedere*), has become deciduous (*de+cadere*), and therefore cyclical.

And yet, of course, Latour's language has become, if anything, even more urgently martial, more militantly decisive than ever before. In *War of the Worlds*, we read that "the West has to admit to the existence of war in order to make peace."[11] But this making of peace has a greater dimension. We need to stop making war in order to wage it, in order to be able to take arms against the unwitting war that, according to James Lovelock as summarized by Latour, we are waging against the world: "He is not talking about one of those antiquated wars that so many humans wage against one another, but of another war, the one that humans, *as a whole*, wage, without any explicit declaration, against *Gaia*."[12] This war cannot be won, for "either we come out on top of Gaia, and we disap-

pear with her; or we *lose* against Gaia, and she manages to shudder us out of existence. Now that's 'terror' for real."[13]

In this bellicose conception of our new relation to nature, Latour follows his conservative master, Serres, even to the point of borrowing his metaphor in *La Guerre mondiale*, of a war against the world: "The reader must forgive my audacity in changing the meaning of the expression: World War. Instead of giving to it the signification it has in the two conflicts which involved a majority of people, or nations, I speak here of a war that sets the whole world (*tout le monde*) against the World."[14] But this mobilization is different from other mobilizations, which were always temporary. Populations were enjoined with an *encore un effort*, to gather their energies and resources together to pit them against an enemy that threatened their very existence. Always, there was the prospect of victory. The instant jettisoning of Churchill, the war leader, by the postwar British electorate seemed to be the proof that British people had come to think of the war as being fought to bring into being a different world, without or beyond the state of conflict. But the effort that the world is currently being enjoined to make is different, for, like the communist revolutions, this mobilization must be permanent. Jacques Derrida has called language "a machine for undoing urgency."[15] But we will need to ensure that the problem of climate change remains something with which we can never permit ourselves to be bored. Perhaps indeed, maintaining the level of interested stress might be the most important thing the humanities can do in relation to the question of climate change.

The War on Terror is insistently twinned with, by being opposed to, the World War, the war to end the War-Against-the-World. Latour lost no time in condemning the fuss made in response to the Paris attacks on November 13 as trivial compared with the real threat to civilization that would be debated at the World Climate Summit in Paris. For Latour, "this kind of thuggery is a law-and-order matter, not war, despite all the flag-waving and calls to arms."[16] Having distinguished terrorism and climate change, Latour immediately reassociated them, on the grounds that both of them involve nihilistic suicide: "Just like those who kill themselves in the act of killing, people in positions of responsibility who fail to take on the issue of global climate change with the greatest seriousness is [sic] shouting in unison with the terrorists: Long live death!"[17]

The rhyme between "earthly science," or a humanities attuned to questions relating to ecology, and this ecology of interconnected, rather than hierarchically divided, forms of life seems compelling and natural. But there is also something strange about it. This strangeness consists in the suggestion that an intellectual culture that has an ecological form will be more capable of generating and sustaining ecological content

and having ecological effects. Modernization put us at a fatal distance from nature, reducing it to the demeaned and disenchanted condition of object. Surely then, so the concealed logic goes, anything that disallows that distance will make it impossible for us to continue with our work of environmental despoliation? An enriched ecology of intellectual practices, of the kind that Latour projects in *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, is taken to be ecological in its effects. Latour's work since the early 1990s has been conducted on two fronts that he believes ultimately converge, namely social epistemology and ecology. This is a magical operation that partakes of a defining fantasy of self-definition. We have somehow to transcend transcendence, since the willingness or desire to attain the high ground, or even to slip the surly bonds of earth altogether, is precisely what has left us up to our necks in the mire. Latour thinks, or writes as if he thinks, that we need a drastic change of philosophy. Though we might remind ourselves again that Latour's primary affiliation and addressee is not the humanities but the social sciences, this is a familiar role for what calls itself the humanities, one that science and technology, for all its juggernaut-like power, tends meekly to acknowledge whenever it agrees to enlist an ethics expert on its advisory board. But a change of heart or mind need make no difference at all. A difference to our chances of survival will be whatever results in a dramatic decrease in carbon emissions. That's it. Don't follow the objects or the actants, follow the numbers, for they are what will kill or cure us.

This move, of mistaking epistemology for effect, is one of the most common of the dream-machines of the humanities. But the problem is not one of how we understand what we are; it is a problem of what we decide to do, or do without deciding. It is a technical and not an epistemological question. It is not a question of how we come to feel about our being-in-the-world; it is a question of what kind of being in the world we manage to bring about or retain. Even "The Question Concerning Technology" is most impelling and urgent as a technical and not a philosophical question. Climate change is a technical problem. Changing how we think about our place in the world might do some good, but only if it helps with the job of engineering.

It is not that the human should be entirely evacuated from the humanities. Indeed, it is just the opposite. The problem of human involvement in nature will need to become ever more prominent and unignorable. But taking account of the human—of human entanglements and effects—is different from referring every question to "the human." The question of whether and how humans are to survive and prosper, if they/we are, can be usefully decoupled from the question of what "the human" might be, and what "the humanities" might take as their mission.

The way to make yourself important and necessary is to define a problem in such a way that only your involvement or intercession will solve it. Thus, science and engineering can be made to seem like the source of a problem that only the balm of letting-be can mitigate. One can see something similar in the ways in which the problem of the fantasy-object known as "capitalism" is construed in the humanities. Much political thinking is motivated by the effort to anthropomorphize capitalism—and one can tell this is going on whenever capitalism is referred to as "capital." This discursive move allows one to imagine capitalism as an ideology or even an intentional and self-willing subject rather than a set of structures and conditions. That is, it allows one to think in terms of what capitalism wants and what it does in the furtherance of its wants. The psycho-epistemological payoff for this projection of intentionality is immense. For now one is faced not with the problem of a set of complex conditions that need to be understood and reconstructed without worsening the problem, but with the problem of a will, indomitable or insidious as it may be. And all that is then required to resist or, who knows, even to defeat capitalism, is to want something different from it, opposing your will to its. But if capital were not thought to want things any more than the Ebola virus or a tropical cyclone, one might have to set to the task of understanding and reconstructing mechanisms rather than reforming persons or forcing them into compliance. No wonder the humanities are so convinced that persons are much more complicated than machines, even though everything they say about them in the storybooks and nursery rhymes they love so much proclaims the opposite. One reforms the problem in fantasy in order to make it susceptible to fantasy solutions.

It looks as though our survival may depend upon an act of engineering greater and more extensive than any ever before undertaken, one that encompasses all aspects of social, political, economic, and psychological life. Whether we seek to slow or reverse climate change (wind turbines, solar panels, carbon capture), or simply to adapt to it (flood defenses), our response is going in one way or another to have to be engineered. If things go well, the thing called the humanities may negotiate some kind of role in the work of stressory maintenance and affect management that may enable us, at the very least, to stay focused on a problem that is going to go away only if we are even more completely wrong about things than we have ever been. The greenhouse effect will be answered only by some heightening of the kind of "greenhouse-effect" that Peter Sloterdijk has identified as the work of culture, the creation of artificially maintained spheres of security and well-being to protect against "the cosmic frost infiltrating the human sphere" and the "shellessness

in space" that ensued upon the Enlightenment banishment of divine providence from nature.[18] We will all of us need to understand that we are involved in engineering instead of emancipation.

The measure of failure and success will not be: have we at last understood the truth of our embeddedness in the world? It will be: have we helped decrease or increase carbon emissions? We are going for some time yet to have to live by numbers, watching the emission levels going up more or less quickly as one watches the taxi meter. What Latour offers is a kind of allegorical letting be: a project in which the humanities become the shepherds of social being, carefully conserving rather than brutally massacring "modes of existence." This is a pseudo-ecological exercise, one that is isomorphic with ecological thinking and action, without in fact being it.

Latour is right to want to sustain a diversity of styles of thought and forms of life. But it would be wrong to think of the humanities as naturally equipped to provide this diversity (not that anyone could accuse Latour of thinking this). It is often supposed that the pursuit of scientific or technical subjects of concern has tended to produce a grimly technicist monoculture, which it is the job of the humanities to diversify. But monomania is a general problem for human beings, not just for scientifically minded ones, and humanists can be just as one-eyed and obsessive as scientists. We need engineering and mathematics to rescue us from religious or poetic obsessiveness just as often as we need our medical students to be "humanized" by taking courses in the European novel.

The humanities routinely offer a dramatization and a glamorization of minority, an exiled marginality magnified into the *condition humaine*. "The humanities" often seem to mean just the same thing as "the Celts," which began its long and ludicrous career as a word meaning "not us," or "those over there." But as the proliferation of Burns suppers and St. Patrick's Day Parades all over the world attests, who does not want to be part of "the Celtic fringe"? Similarly, the humanities make a cult of self-Celtification. Everyone wants to be a Celt, where a Celt means someone on the fringe, someone driven out from the centers of power. We aspire to wear, as a badge of pride, the epigraph that Matthew Arnold took from Macpherson's Ossian for his lectures on Celtic literature: "They always went to battle and they always fell." (The much-reproduced Wikipedia page remarks of the word "keltoi," with an immaculate piece of *petitio principii*, that "several authors have supposed it to be Celtic in origin." But the question of who these Celts were and what the inside definition of being "Celtic" might be, is exactly what is in question when one investigates the use of the word.)

The humanities will become significant only when they really accept their marginality, rather than bloating it into a *folie de grandeur*. There may indeed be a public relations role for the humanities, in softening people up, or toughening them up, for the kind of world it looks as though we will need to bring about or put up with. One thing is certain, that the prodigious growth in the humanities (we are not supposed to notice this, since the humanities can only exist in a condition of defensive and resentful outrage at being cut) was sustained by a hydrocarbon-fueled high-growth economy that may have gone forever, or, if it has not gone, may henceforth have to be held at bay. The humanities have not shown much appetite for the kind of austerity that might have to go along with the low-growth economy forming part of a sustainable world. The humanities will become useful at the point at which they learn to be useful occasionally and in part, rather than existing contemptuously and uselessly apart. They may learn to take part in the composition of a new phase of human life, a negotiated rather than a martial Anthropocene, if they learn to give up their immodest excitability in favor of a kind of modest composure.

When asked in an interview what he thought the future of the humanities might be, Serres paused for a moment, then replied, simply, "Death."[19] But there might be a more hopeful way of seeing this imminent demise, a way presaged by the sly Brechtian adage "where there's death, there's hope." To be sure, there may be a cost. The humanities may get to join the epistemological party only at the cost of the principle that has sustained them. In other words, the vauntingly impotent humanities may earn a slice of power if they give up a large measure of their presumptuous dominion over the realm of "the human." A new name, or a discrediting of the old one, would really help a lot. Can there ever have been a more absurd claim than that the vast and proliferating range of things undertaken by humans—all forms of industrial production, economic activity, scientific research, technical development, and mathematical speculation—are somehow more incidental to being human than listening to music or reading stories? What kind of insanity is it to imagine that mathematics is not part of the humanities? Given the conspicuous absence of mathematical capacity or curiosity among badgers and bacteria, it would seem that nothing could be more essentially human than mathematics, along with everything that it makes sense of and makes possible. Yet those who affiliate themselves with "the humanities" persist in equating numbers with death and the inhuman.

Latour has found more important things with which to occupy himself than the nature or future of the humanities. This is precisely the reason why his work might be salutary for them. The most important thing

that the humanities need to have said to them is "this is not about you." Latour's work allows us to wrench the question "what future is there for the humanities?" into the question "what future is there but the humanities?"— meaning by this that the many different ways in which the engineering of the human, and the regulation of the relations between the human and natural worlds, must proliferate. If the humanities can give up their perfervid fantasy that they are the custodians of the human, they may have something useful to contribute.

University of Cambridge

## NOTES

1 Bruno Latour, "The Enlightenment without the Critique: A Word on Michel Serres' Philosophy," in *Contemporary French Philosophy*, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), 85.
2 Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 239.
3 Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, trans. Catherine Porter and Heather Maclean (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2010), 29.
4 Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2013), xxvi.
5 Latour, "Enlightenment Without Critique," 91.
6 Latour "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" 246.
7 Latour "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" 232.
8 Latour, "A Plea for Earthly Sciences," in *New Social Connections: Sociology's Subjects and Objects*, ed. Judith Burnett, Syd Jeffers, and Graham Thomas (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 75.
9 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), 104.
10 Latour, *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, 11.
11 Latour, *War of the Worlds: What About Peace?*, ed. John Tresch, trans. Charlotte Bigg (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2002), 29.
12 Latour, "A Plea for Earthly Sciences," 1.
13 Latour, "A Plea for Earthly Sciences," 1.
14 Michel Serres, *La Guerre mondiale* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2008), 137–38.
15 Jacques Derrida, "*Ja*, or the *faux-bond*," in *Points . . . Interviews 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995), 30–77.
16 Latour, "The Other State of Emergency," trans Jane Kurtz, Reporterre, November 23, 2015, available at http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/REPORTERRE-11-15-GB_0.pdf.
17 Latour, "The Other State of Emergency."
18 Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres*, vol. 1, *Bubbles: Microspherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2011), 24.
19 "Michel Serres at Stanford" (lecture, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, 2011), available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zb5-l45dbow.